

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 207 922

SO 013 667

AUTHOR Horan, Patrick M.; Killian, Molly Sizer
TITLE The Southern Aged: Race, Residence and Socioeconomic Conditions.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August, 1981).
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Blacks; *Older Adults; Quality of Life; Racial Factors; Rural Urban Differences; Social Science Research; Socioeconomic Influences; *Socioeconomic Status
IDENTIFIERS *United States (South)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the socioeconomic circumstances of the aged population in the Southern United States. Data used are drawn from the 15% 1970 Public Use Sample for noninstitutionalized individuals aged 55 and over from Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The paper focuses on some of the major dimensions of social differentiation within the aged population. The impact of race and rural/urban residence on a series of socioeconomic outcomes, including living conditions, position (past or current) in the labor force, and the levels and sources of economic support is investigated. Findings include the following. The Black aged in the South experience much worse living conditions than do the White aged within all residence categories. Living conditions for both races improve substantially with movement from rural to urban to major metropolitan settings. For both sexes and for both racial categories, personal earnings, as well as personal income, increases from rural to urban to major metropolitan settings. In rural areas, the earnings and income levels of Black males are about half that of their White male counterparts; and these economic differences between Black and White males increases in the urban and major metropolitan areas. Regarding sources of income, the dependence on social security and railroad retirement remains fairly constant across residential categories for Blacks of both sexes, but declines for Whites from rural to urban to major metropolitan areas. In general, the aged in metropolitan areas depend more heavily on earnings as a source of personal income than the aged in urban or in rural areas. (Author/RM)

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THE SOUTHERN AGED: RACE, RESIDENCE
AND SOCIOECONOMIC CONDITIONS*

Patrick M. Horan

Molly Sizer Killian

University of Georgia

Preliminary Draft: Not for citation or quotation without written permission
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* Prepared for presentation at the 1981 Annual Meetings of the American
Sociological Association, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August, 1981.
This research was supported by GAES Project H686 "Economic Segmentation
and Nonmetropolitan Socioeconomic Processes."

Abstract

The recent growth of empirical research on the aged in American society has contributed greatly to our knowledge of how the socioeconomic circumstances of the aged compare with those of the younger population. Less research attention has been directed towards how the socioeconomic circumstances of the aged vary within that population. This paper represents the first step in a series of analyses which will examine the socioeconomic circumstances of the aged population in the southern United States. Instead of treating age as the primary dimension of social differentiation, we focus on some of the major dimensions of social differentiation within the aged population. In this analysis, we investigate the impact of race and rural/urban residence on a series of socioeconomic outcomes, including living conditions, position (past or current) in the labor force, and the levels and sources of economic support. Using data drawn from the 15% 1970 Public Use Sample for noninstitutionalized individuals aged 55 and over from Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina, our analysis demonstrates that the black aged in the South experience much worse living conditions than do the white aged within all residence categories. We examine the socioeconomic bases for these disparities in living conditions, including retirement status, occupation and industry of employment, sources and levels of individual earnings and income. For all these variables, we find substantial racial differences that cannot be attributed to rural/urban residence.

The last decade has brought a remarkable growth of research on the aged in American society. Nonetheless, there remain substantial gaps in our knowledge about the socioeconomic conditions of the older segment of the population. Goldstein (1971: 249) identifies these gaps as follows:

"Considerable attention has been focused on the economic status of the aged population compared to younger age cohorts. Much less is known about variations within the older population itself resulting from membership in different social and economic segments of the population."

Thus, while the social differentiation of the general population has been a major focus for sociological researchers, research on the aged population has emphasized comparisons between age-groups at the expense of inquiry into social differentiation among the aged. The result of this trend has been to reinforce a conception of the aged as a homogeneous group, a group in which the dimensions of social differentiation that characterize the rest of the population are of minor importance.

On the positive side, this research emphasis on young/old comparisons signals the coming-of-age of social gerontology as a sociological specialty area. By focusing on age as a primary dimension of social differentiation, such research legitimates this specialty area by identifying the very real socioeconomic implications of aging in an industrial society. Likewise, the growing awareness of the adverse socioeconomic position of the aged can lead to further research probing the social and economic bases of this position, as well as to consideration of policies that might alleviate some of the negative consequences of the social organization of aging in industrial society.

On the negative side, this emphasis on the primacy of age, as opposed to other dimensions of social differentiation, tends to reinforce certain negative views of the aged as a homogeneous and helpless group for whom basic principles of social differentiation and of the socioeconomic organization of industrial society do not apply. This tendency contributes to both the isolation of social gerontology from theoretical and research developments in other areas of sociology and to limitations on our understanding of the ways in which the social organization of aging is related to the social and economic organization of industrial society.

The present analysis examines the social and economic differentiation of the noninstitutionalized aged population in five Southern states. In the general population, minority group membership and rural residence are typically associated with socioeconomic disadvantage. The socioeconomic circumstances of minority and rural aged have received little systematic attention in the gerontological research literature, yet extrapolation from trends in the general population suggests that these groups may be especially disadvantaged. The analysis here provides a basis for assessing such extrapolations by considering the socioeconomic correlates of race and residence for the southern aged.

Numerous observers have noted that paucity of information on black and other minority aged within the gerontological literature (see, e.g., Jackson, 1971 and Kent, 1971). It seems clear that the black aged in the U.S. experience worse socioeconomic circumstances than their white counterparts. However, the evaluation and interpretation of the interplay between race and age remains a matter of considerable theoretical and empirical controversy (Dowd and Bengston, 1978). The "double jeopardy" hypothesis proposes

that membership in a racial minority serves to exacerbate the socioeconomic disadvantage associated with aging, while the "leveling" hypothesis proposes that aging serves to reduce the socioeconomic differences between blacks and whites. Both these hypotheses concern the sort of young/old comparisons noted above. In the present inquiry we will focus on a set of issues which precede that of the impact of aging on socioeconomic differences among the races. Those issues concern the relationships between race and other dimensions of social differentiation among the aged, and their relative impacts on such socioeconomic outcomes as living conditions, position in the labor force, and income.

Similarly, although we know that rural residence is associated with lower socioeconomic levels for all segments of the adult population, we have little information on the interplay between residence, race and other characteristics such as education and work history in the determination of socioeconomic well-being. Can the socioeconomic disadvantage of the rural aged be attributed to the racial or educational composition of this group, or is the rural/urban distinction an important consideration in itself? As with the black aged, the limited research literature largely based on small and often unrepresentative data sets and typically employing relatively simplistic bivariate research designs, provides little basis for addressing such multivariate questions about the social and economic differentiation of the rural aged.

The present paper seeks to contribute to our knowledge about the socioeconomic correlates of race and rural/urban residence among the aged population of the Southeastern United States. The data for this analysis are drawn from the 15% Public Use Sample of the 1970 U.S. Census and include all non-institutionalized individuals aged 55 and over from Alabama, Georgia,

Mississippi, North Carolina and South Carolina. Although the geographic restriction of the sample limits direct inference to the aged population of the U.S., this geographically restricted sample includes substantial portions of the black, rural aged in the U.S., and thus facilitates an inquiry into the interrelationships among race, residence and socioeconomic circumstance.

In this exploratory inquiry into the socioeconomic differentiation of the southern aged, we will examine the impact of race and rural/urban residence on a number of different socioeconomic outcomes, including living conditions, position in the labor force and the levels and sources of economic support. Our racial comparisons will be limited to black/white differences because of the limited representation of other nonwhite minorities in this region. Our residence variable consists of three categories based on census information: rural residents, residents of urban areas, and residents of large metropolitan areas. When race and residence are considered simultaneously, a total of six different groups are defined consisting of black and white residents of rural, urban and major metropolitan areas. These six groups will provide the foundation for our empirical analysis.

Before examining the socioeconomic impacts of race and residence, it will be helpful to examine some aspects of the demographic composition of the six race-by-residence groups introduced above. Table 1 presents information on the age composition, schooling, living arrangements and migration rates for these six groups of individuals aged 55 and over. Although whites exhibit a slightly lower mean age than blacks across all residence categories, examination of the age distributions suggests that there are no striking differences in age composition by either race or residence. In contrast, there are systematic differences in mean years of schooling by both race and

residence, with whites exhibiting higher schooling levels than blacks and with schooling increasing for both groups as we move from rural to urban to major metropolitan residence. Similarly, blacks are more likely than whites to live alone and less likely to live with relatives other than spouse, while residence in the two urban categories is associated with higher proportions of aged individuals living alone or with spouses and with lower proportions living with relatives other than spouse. Proportion of inter-county migrants (over the period 1965-1970) is greater for whites than blacks and increases as we move from rural to large metropolitan areas.

When we turn from issues of demographic composition to the impact of race and residence on living conditions of the aged, we encounter a much more striking set of comparisons among our six groups. The first five items in Table 2 provides measures of the absence of what most would consider to be basic amenities: kitchen facilities, hot/cold running water, flush toilet, bathtub or shower, and sewage disposal. The striking order-of-magnitude differences involved here are suggested by the fact that over 50% of the rural black aged live in housing missing all of these facilities while less than one percent of the white urban aged live in housing missing any of these facilities. A more careful examination of the detailed distributions indicates that the black aged experience much worse living conditions than whites within all residence categories, and that living conditions for both races improve substantially as we move from rural to urban to major metropolitan settings.

The last two items included in Table 2 are the presence/absence of an automobile and a telephone in the households of aged individuals. Both these items may be interpreted as measures of the relative isolation of

these individuals. Again we find striking racial differences within residence categories, with the black aged more than twice as likely as the white not to have either automobile or telephone available. Residence has no uniform cross-race impact on the presence of an automobile, but does serve to increase the probability that a telephone will be available for both races.

The extreme racial and residential differences in living conditions reported in Table 2 for our sample of Southern aged can probably be traced in part to corresponding differences in the quantity and quality of labor force participation by the six groups. In order to examine this link, we will examine several dimensions of the labor force participation of these groups. However, this focus on the quantity and quality of labor force participation necessitates some changes in the specification and handling of our PUS data. First, because labor force participation has traditionally played a different role in the life of adult males than in that of females, we will present our analyses of the labor force participation of aged Southern residents separately for males and females. Second, the PUS provides information on employment, occupation and industry only for individuals who have been employed during the preceding ten years. Thus our analysis of these characteristics is based on those subsets of the total sample that reported some labor force participation during the period 1960-70.

Table 3 presents some basic information on the participation of the different race and residence subgroups of aged within the labor force. The figure in the first row for both males and females is the percentage of the total group sample that reported any labor force participation during the period from 1960 to 1970. As anticipated, these figures differ markedly between males and females with most male groups exhibiting over 75% labor force participation while most female groups exhibit under 50% labor force

participation. Among males, whites exhibit slightly higher percentages than blacks, a disparity that increases as we move from rural to urban to major metropolitan settings. Among the aged females, blacks exhibit a higher rate of labor force participation than whites; and rural residents, of both races, show lower labor force participation than residents of urban or metropolitan areas.

The remaining figures in Table 3 pertain only to that portion of the sample which had participated in the labor force during the last ten years. Turning first to the retirement percentages, we note that for both sexes blacks exhibit slightly higher retirement rates than whites and that retirement percentages decline as we move from rural to urban to major metropolitan areas. The self-employment figures reflect substantial racial disparities for males and females with whites more likely to be self-employed. There is no clear trend in self-employment rates across residence groups, apart from the impact of farm ownership on rural male self-employment.

Occupation has traditionally served as an important indicator of the placement of individuals within the world of work. Table 3 contains two measures of the placement of older individuals within the occupational structure, mean occupational prestige and percentage employment in white collar occupations. There is a substantial disparity in occupational prestige for blacks and whites of both sexes, a disparity which increases as we move from rural to urban to metropolitan areas due to the increasing prestige levels for whites in those areas. The data on percentage employment in white-collar occupations exhibit even greater disparities between blacks and whites with whites more than four times as likely to be in a white-collar occupation as blacks. As with prestige, moving from rural to urban to major metropolitan

groups serves to increase white-collar employment for whites more than for blacks.

Another dimension of the position of individuals within the world of work is the industry of employment. Recent research has emphasized the importance of a distinction between oligopolistic and competitive industries for the economic returns to employees. For example, employees in oligopolistic (core) industries experience higher wages and better retirement benefits than employees in competitive (periphery) industries. In Table 3, we see that blacks of both sexes exhibit lower percentages of core employment than whites. For males, the percentage levels of core employment increase and the racial disparities decrease from rural to urban to metropolitan areas. For females, the effect of residence on core employment is much more limited and there is no trend of declining racial disparities.

We can anticipate that these racial and residential differences in the labor force positions of the aged will be translated into differences in the level of economic resources. Table 4 presents information on the economic levels of this aged population, again divided by sex, race, and residence categories. As can be seen in the figures in the first row for both males and females, the mean level of earnings increases across the residential groups. Although this trend exists for both blacks and whites, the increase is quite substantial for whites and is fairly negligible for blacks. The second row in Table 4 (for both males and females) is the ratio of black earnings to white earnings within each residence category. Although the earnings for blacks and whites increases from rural to urban to major metropolitan areas, the ratio of black-to-white earnings declines for males (i.e., the difference in earnings increases), and remain constant for females.

While these differences in earnings are certainly important and are largely attributable to differences in the labor force positions of the various groups, the overall socioeconomic condition of the aged cannot be depicted merely with labor force earnings. As individuals' attachments to the labor force become weakened, their levels of economic resources are less determined by earnings, and more affected by other sources of income. The third and fourth rows in Table 4 describe (1) the level of total personal income by sex, race and residence and (2) the ratio of black-to-white personal income for each sex and residence group. Again, we find that the mean personal income increases, for both races, from rural to urban to major metropolitan areas, while the ratio of black-to-white personal income declines. Although the average personal income for each male group is larger than their average earnings, the ratio of black-to-white earnings is very similar to the ratio of black-to-white personal income. And, for females, the ratio of black-to-white personal income exhibits a substantial decline across residence categories.

To summarize, we can note that for both sexes and for both racial categories, personal earnings, as well as personal income, increases from rural to urban to major metropolitan settings. In rural areas, the earnings and income levels of black males are about half that of their white male counterparts; and these economic differences between black and white males increase (i.e., the ratio becomes smaller) in the urban and major metropolitan areas. And, although the black-to-white earnings ratio for females remains stable across residence groups, the income gap between black and white females becomes larger from rural to major metropolitan areas. In short, even though the absolute level of economic support is improved for all of

the sex and race subgroups in the metropolitan areas, the black subgroups are relatively worse off in the metropolitan areas than they are in the rural areas.

In order to gain a better understanding of these sex, race, and residence differences in the economic circumstances of the Southern aged, we turn to Table 5, which presents a decomposition of the sources of income for each of our subgroups. The sources of personal income are broken down into: (1) earnings (which includes wages, business earnings and farm earnings); (2) income from social security and railroad retirement; (3) public assistance and/or welfare income; and (4) income from all other sources. The figures in each column are the percentage of that subgroup's personal income which comes from each of the four sources. For example, looking at the first column for males, black rural males rely on earnings for almost 50% of their total personal income: 32% of their income comes from social security and/or railroad retirements, etc.

Comparing our subgroups, we find that, while black males are less reliant on earnings than are white males (within each residence category), black females are more reliant on earnings than their white counterparts. We also find that, in general, the aged in metropolitan areas depend more heavily on earnings as a source of personal income than the aged in urban or in rural areas. The dependence on social security and railroad retirement remains fairly constant across residential categories for blacks of both sexes, but declines for whites from rural to urban to major metropolitan areas. One of the major race and sex differences in the sources of income is the differential reliance upon welfare (or public assistance). Females, within each race and residence subgroups, are more dependent on welfare than are males. And blacks of both sexes within each residence group, rely more

heavily on welfare than do whites.

The analysis here makes it clear that however important a common position within the age structure of industrial society may be for the U.S. aged, race and residence remain important dimensions of social differentiation among the Southern aged. There exist striking racial differences in the living conditions, labor force participation and levels of economic resources, differences that cannot be attributed to between-group differences in residential or age composition. Residence also has a consistent impact on socioeconomic conditions, with absolute levels of socioeconomic well-being increasing from rural to urban to major metropolitan settings. Because this improvement trend in economic levels is greater for whites than for blacks, it results in patterns of increases in absolute economic levels for both races but of greater relative disadvantages of blacks vis a vis whites. Hence any answer to the question of whether urban or metropolitan residence represents a socioeconomic advantage for blacks depends on the comparison point selected. Compared to the socioeconomic levels of blacks in different residence areas, the answer would be yes. Compared to whites in the same residence area, the answer is no.

The answer to this initial question suggests several directions for further research on the aged. First of all, we have seen that differences in the labor force positions of the sex, race and residence subgroups tended to correspond to differences in the levels and sources of economic support. This suggests an inquiry into the process of income determination among the aged; an inquiry that would examine the impact of past and present labor force participation on the socioeconomic well-being of the aged. More broadly, the analysis of the socioeconomic conditions of different racial

and residential groups within the aged population constitutes a necessary foundation for any comparisons across age groups of social differentiation and socioeconomic outcomes.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Southern Aged by Race and Residence

		<u>RURAL</u>		<u>URBAN</u>		<u>MAJOR METROPOLITAN</u>	
		<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>
AGE	Mean Years	66.5	66.0	66.4	66.0	65.9	65.7
	% 55-59	25.8	27.7	25.9	27.6	27.1	28.4
	% 60-64	21.5	23.4	22.1	23.0	24.2	23.8
	% 65-69	21.5	18.3	21.2	18.4	20.0	17.6
	% 70-74	13.7	13.8	13.3	13.6	12.7	13.8
	% 75 +	17.4	16.8	17.4	17.4	16.0	16.4
SCHOOLING	Mean Years	6.7	9.8	7.5	11.4	8.0	12.1
LIVING ARRANGEMENTS	% Living Alone	4.5	2.5	7.2	2.6	7.1	3.8
	% With Spouse	14.4	13.2	21.3	20.0	20.2	18.4
	% With Relatives	56.1	67.6	46.2	60.3	47.0	61.5
	% Other Arrangements	25.0	16.7	25.2	17.0	25.7	16.4
MIGRATION STATUS	% Inter-County Migrants 1965-1970	5.3	7.6	5.6	10.0	8.6	12.5
TOTAL N		2932	9767	3226	9325	1452	4655

Table 2: Living Conditions by Race and Residence

	<u>RURAL</u>		<u>URBAN</u>		<u>MAJOR METROPOLITAN</u>	
	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>
<u>% MISSING</u>						
1. Complete kitchen facilities	58.5	9.6	20.6	1.6	4.9	0.8
2. Hot/cold running water	64.7	17.4	32.0	3.6	8.6	1.3
3. Flush toilet	62.8	17.5	18.7	2.5	5.1	1.0
4. Bathtub or shower	63.4	18.3	29.4	3.4	6.2	1.3
5. Sewage disposal	65.8	21.3	16.8	2.1	4.9	0.5
6. All of the above	56.3	8.5	13.3	0.7	2.3	0.2
7. Automobile	46.5	20.4	56.2	21.1	51.0	16.3
8. Telephone	51.7	23.5	35.2	11.7	23.7	6.4
N	2932	9767	3226	9325	1452	4655

Table 3: Position in the Labor Force by Sex, Race and Residence

	<u>RURAL</u>		<u>URBAN</u>		<u>MAJOR METROPOLITAN</u>	
	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>
<u>MALES</u>						
% Recent LFP	77.3	79.2	77.6	84.3	74.2	85.5
% Retired	39.2	38.0	33.9	31.2	32.3	28.7
% Self-Employed	20.0	32.5	9.0	20.7	8.1	16.7
% White Collar	4.7	16.0	6.5	37.2	5.4	45.0
Mean Prestige	27.4	35.6	26.3	39.4	26.5	41.7
% Core Sector	26.9	41.4	36.7	53.5	51.1	57.9
N	1051	3657	1009	3236	442	1656

<u>FEMALES</u>						
% Recent LFP	45.0	34.4	54.9	45.4	53.0	46.3
% Retired	51.0	47.0	44.1	40.2	40.7	38.6
% Self-Employed	5.9	9.9	4.8	7.6	3.1	8.6
% White Collar	7.9	30.5	11.1	34.6	8.1	37.1
Mean Prestige	23.9	35.0	24.9	37.3	23.8	39.0
% Core Sector	9.2	23.9	8.9	28.9	10.1	31.5
N	708	1770	1057	2494	454	1258

Table 4: Economic Levels by Sex, Race and Residence

	<u>RURAL</u>		<u>URBAN</u>		<u>MAJOR METROPOLITAN</u>	
	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>
<u>MALES</u>						
Mean Earnings	1320.	2846.	1798.	4651.	2280.	6170.
Ratio: Black/White Earnings	.46		.39		.37	
Mean Personal Income	1931.	3747.	2456.	5949.	3024.	8021.
Ratio: Black/White Personal Income	.52		.41		.38	
N	1360	4615	1300	3837	596	1937
<u>FEMALES</u>						
Mean Earnings	377.	669.	589.	1080.	771.	1414.
Ratio: Black/White Earnings	.56		.55		.55	
Mean Personal Income	789.	1225.	1110.	1993.	1281.	2542.
Ratio: Black/White Personal Income	.64		.56		.50	
N	1572	5152	1926	5488	856	2718

Table 5: Personal Income Composition by Sex, Race and Residence

	<u>RURAL</u>		<u>URBAN</u>		<u>MAJOR METROPOLITAN</u>	
	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITE</u>
<u>MALES</u>						
% Reporting Any Personal Income	92.5	94.9	94.6	96.8	94.3	97.5
% of Total Personal Income From:						
Earnings	49.6	52.3	51.3	58.4	54.6	60.0
Social Security	31.4	33.0	31.6	26.5	34.1	22.6
Welfare	12.5	4.4	9.3	2.5	3.8	1.4
Other	5.6	9.6	6.2	12.1	6.8	15.7
N	1258	4382	1230	3715	562	1888
<u>FEMALES</u>						
% Reporting Any Personal Income	73.9	68.1	81.1	78.1	78.3	78.9
% of Total Personal Income From:						
Earnings	30.2	29.3	36.0	34.6	40.1	35.9
Social Security	38.7	49.7	36.6	42.1	35.8	41.9
Welfare	24.1	9.5	19.8	6.1	16.6	3.4
Other	5.1	10.8	5.5	16.1	5.8	18.0
N	1162	3507	1561	4284	670	2144